



UNITED NATIONS PUSHES FOR JUSTICE IN CAMBODIA

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Aging Khmer Rouge leaders, who led a bloody regime in Cambodia that left millions dead in the 1970s, may finally face an international tribunal for their crimes.

The United Nations is trying to collect enough money to put on trial leaders of the violent communist movement led by Pol Pot, who took power of the Southeast Asian country in 1975 with the goal of creating a radical new society.

Secretary-general Kofi Annan said international donors could bring justice to the Cambodian people.

“You can send a message that the international community will do its part to ensure that, however late, and however imperfect, impunity will not remain unchallenged, and a measure of justice will be done. That will be a precious and important gift to Cambodia,” he said.

The Khmer Rouge

Cambodia, which shares a long border with Vietnam, was swept up in the United States’ battle against communism in the 1960s and early 1970s.

After years of bombings and devastation, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975 and renamed the country Democratic Kampuchea, rejecting capitalism and seeking to get rid of any person seen as an intellectual: teachers, civil servants, religious leaders.

Peasants were held up as the ideal citizens, cities were emptied and everyone was forced to live in the countryside.

To begin Cambodian society anew, the Khmer Rouge declared that it was Year Zero. They eliminated money and private property, banned religion and tried to sever all family ties.

In four years, two million people or one-fourth of the population, were executed, starved, tortured or worked to death during what came to be known as “the killing fields.”

“We were knowingly walked toward our death just like cattle that were being herded toward a slaughter house,” Ranachith Yimsut, who was 15-years old in 1977, told The Digital Archive of Cambodian Holocaust Survivors in 1992.

No one was ever held responsible for these crimes.

Who is responsible?

When the Khmer Rouge lost power to the Vietnamese in 1979, Pol Pot fled Phnom Penh, the capital. For 13 years there was fighting between various factions that didn't end until a peace agreement in 1991. U.N.-backed elections were held in 1993 and national elections again in 1998.

Pol Pot died in the jungles of Cambodia in 1998 and the Khmer Rouge finally surrendered. But many former Khmer Rouge officers and soldiers have blended back into society. Even the current prime minister, Hun Sen, was a former Khmer Rouge officer.

Most Cambodian history textbooks still do not mention the atrocities committed during the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror.

U.S. involvement

The U.S. is reluctant to get involved in a Cambodian tribunal due in part to its own history with the country.

During the war with Vietnam the U.S. secretly bombed Cambodia and supported Pol Pot's regime because it was anti-Vietnamese.

This support continued in various forms – including recognition of the Khmer Rouge in the United Nations and food aid to the group -- throughout the administrations of former presidents Ford, Carter, Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

President Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski said later of Cambodia and Pol Pot, "I encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot.... Pol Pot was an abomination. We could never support him, but China could."

While the U.S. at times deplored and acknowledged the atrocities committed by Pol Pot's regime, the Cold War threat of the spread of communism throughout Asia pushed various administrations to support the group.

Today, due to an unrelated dispute over international tribunals, the United States is not expected to take part in the Cambodian effort, but Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice could still authorize U.S. participation in the attempt to bring the Khmer Rouge leaders to justice.

Mixed reaction to tribunal

The tribunal evokes a mixed response among Cambodians who lived through decades of hardship and terror. Some fear that reopening old wounds could undermine hard-won stability.

Supporters of the tribunal say that its aims go beyond simply punishing the soldiers identified with the genocide. "We need to set the record straight. People have begun to deny that it happened.... They say it was the American bombs or the Vietnamese invasion," said Helen Jarvis, an adviser to the government.

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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